



## **Europe Un-imagined**

### **Nation and Culture at a French-German Channel**

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# Europe Un-Imagined: Nation and Culture at a French-German Television Channel By Damien Stankiewicz

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For citizens of the European Union, navigating the relationship between the transnational and national is very complicated business. Though they are both European and national citizens, it is by far the nation which is most present in their everyday lives, their minds, and the cultures they imagine themselves to belong to. This no doubt has a lot to do with the way people think and act as social and cultural beings. Even though national cultures are in many ways as fragmented, diverse, and heterogeneous as “European” culture, we imagine ourselves to live and belong in local, national communities. It also has a lot to do, however, with the fact that media systems in Europe are firmly based inside national cultures. We see the world ‘out there’ mediated through national rather than transnational screens.



Media and questions of national belonging and European integration feature prominently in *Europe Un-Imagined*, Damien Stankiewicz’s interesting and inspiring case study of the German-French television station ARTE. Stankiewicz is an American anthropologist, and like all media anthropologists, he actually observes and talks to people on the ground. He sets out to discover the culture that defines ARTE as an institution, as well as the working practices and ideas and concepts that ARTE employees use on a daily basis. He starts by asking questions about the transnational mission of the channel, its Europeanness, and its strategy to build a Europe and a European identity through television programs. He frames these opening questions to the ARTE staff with the grand vision of the first president of ARTE, Jérôme Clément:

To change mentalities, frame of mind, and to create the conditions of a veritable united Europe, it isn’t enough to have a currency, an army corps, and legal directives... What is necessary is a *common imagination*. To think Europe together. So that Germans, French, Italians, Spanish, and all others, even the English, learn to look at the world and to think the world together (Stankiewicz 2017, 3).

This vision of a common, European culture is no doubt a strong part of EU cultural and media policy, and was clearly behind the forming of ARTE by France and Germany—two historical adversaries—in 1991. Thus one of the reasons to start the channel was to overcome historical conflicts and to bridge the culture of two of modern Europe’s main powers. However, the aim was also, as Stankiewicz clearly points out, to represent a broader Europe on the screen and thereby contribute to a broader understanding of a common European culture and identity.

That said, when Stankiewicz presents Clément's vision to ARTE's program makers, the responses are vague and evasive. He thus argues early in the book that Clément's vision of a common European imagination is nowhere to be found at the channel, and that perhaps we need to change our understanding of how European collaboration works and how strong a role media plays in European integration. As he concludes after a series of chapters where he looks at actual programming policy and practice:

Between 'trans-border media' and the 'trans-border identities' which they are thought to engender, there rest myriad interferences and contingencies...after eighteen months or so of research, it was more or less clear to me that ARTE does not produce anything like a widely held or coherent French-German or European 'imagination', although this was one of the founding goals (and a remaining impetus) of the media organization (Stankiewicz 2017: 214).

What the employees do try to create is a blending structure—a media culture and institution where the national and transnational cultures and tendencies mix. Both the French and German staff express this idea with the German word "*Mengengerüst*." But the everyday attempt to achieve *Mengengerüst* is complicated by social and cultural dynamics not unlike those found at the level of EU cultural and media policy. To manage these dynamics, Stankiewicz shows how the staff draws on national and cultural stereotypes. Stereotypes in fact have many faces and although much research finds stereotypes to be arbitrary, superficial, and useful in the formations of populist movements, Stankiewicz also illustrates the ways in which "they provide a rough but necessary social map with which people must navigate complex social terrain" (2017, 113), as well as "perform complex, ambivalent, and multidirectional kinds of social work, both opening and closing spaces of political possibility" (2017, 114). So, even though the German and French staff of the station genuinely seems to be working according to a programming profile for all Europeans, they still very much work from their national perspectives in achieving this common goal. Stankiewicz' point is that this is how Europe is imagined and functions in practice: we combine a boundedness and fixation to a local and national reality and mentality with an ability to also work in a transnational context.

Stankiewicz looks at this way of being situated both within a specific national and a more vague transnational imagined community in his analysis of some of the key programming departments and genres ARTE is famous for making. For example, in Chapter 4, he looks at the history programs, where ARTE, since 1991, has done a lot to create programs on WWII, but over time also broader themes, all with the aim to see history from a German, French, and broader European perspective. Even though the programs do not always mirror the whole of Europe, Stankiewicz sees them as important because they have a reflexive dimension in which different perspectives of history meet and ordinary people are included in the narrative.

In Chapter 5 he looks at another central program category: cultural programs. Here, again, culture is certainly not a fixed concept, and one of the things Stankiewicz learns is that there seems to be a difference between a French and a German concept of culture. It becomes clear in interviews that the traditional distinction between culture as art, on the one hand, and a broader concept of culture, on the other, plays a role here. One of the problems with the anthropological methodology of this book becomes obvious in this

chapter. Whereas there are a few concrete programs mentioned in Chapter 4, Chapter 5 has almost no concrete examples. It is a study of how those that make the programs think about themselves as program makers, but the book tells us very little about perhaps the most important thing: how do the programs contribute to a broader understanding of Europe, and how have the programs been received and used by Europeans in different countries?

ARTE as a television channel does a lot to show us the diversity of Europe, its culture, heritage, art and social and political life. As such, it works at creating a broader cultural understanding between the different national cultures of Europe, and it also works to break down negative and uninformed stereotypes between Europeans. But what about the audience—the viewers of Europe? This is something Stankiewicz does try to deal with in Chapter 6, called “trans/national audiences.” As in the other chapters, his focus is, however, not so much on actually understanding audiences, but on understanding the differences in the way the Germans and the French deal with audience data. It is also about how the channel is trying to navigate in a Europe where media platforms are changing. The problem—as Stankiewicz points out—is that ARTE is a niche channel that mostly reaches a European elite. It is not a channel that speaks to those Europeans who are perhaps most influenced by nationalist and populist sentiments—the European who think about other Europeans in a more stereotypical way.

Zooming out, we can see ARTE as one example of a growing tendency in European film and television culture to form transnational networks and to enter into co-production and creative collaboration. This is born out of necessity as national film and media cultures have come under increased pressure by globalization and digitalization. But it is also, to a certain degree, a result of a shift in national and European media policies from what we could call a more essentialist thinking, both on the national and European level, to a more pragmatic policy-oriented thinking. There have always been visionary dreamers in EU policy advocating a strong cultural identity and unified European culture, but since the 1990s a more pragmatic politics has gradually taken over. A number of other studies underline the role of transnational networks in creating a common understanding and professional standards that combine national and transnational elements. The strong rise in co-productions and increased distribution of European media products to a much wider European audience creates more permanent networks and cultures of understanding between national cultures. We are not talking about a united European film- and media culture in the making, but we are talking about a concrete development on ground level of ‘unity in diversity’” taking advantage of differences and building a stronger common platform. Arte is certainly a product of this development and an early attempt to create a transnational European television channel.

Stankiewicz points to the same conclusion in his study of ARTE. The channel was likely born out of a very grand vision of European culture—and this vision still lingers on. But the media culture and programs ARTE has made are European in a much more mundane sense, and the way they were made shows how national cultures and stereotypes play an important role. Stankiewicz shows that there need not be a contradiction between the national and the transnational/European. Rather, they can interact in a creative and productive way. In that sense, mediated cultural encounters are still extremely important if

we want a dynamic relationship between European nation states. Although Stankiewicz is a bit sceptical towards the power of media, recent research on television drama across Europe (Bondebjerg et.al. 2017) points to increasing transnational cultural exchange and debate as people are confronted with drama series from other European countries. The recent success of Nordic noir series, such as *The Bridge*, demonstrates this, as well as the dynamic interplay between difference and sameness, and the national and the transnational.

Ultimately, Stankiewicz discovers a tension at ARTE that captures the difficulty of the EU more broadly: while people are explicitly engaged in a transnational, European project, they struggle to identify what exactly this European dimension is. There is no strong sense of a shared, “imagined community” (Anderson 1991). But as Stankiewicz points out (2017, 139), maybe Anderson’s concept overestimates the homogeneity and strength of national cultures. Maybe we need to accept that cultures on a national and transnational level are much more heterogeneous and complex than we sometimes think. Stankiewicz proposes that we need to go behind and beyond the concept of imagined communities to a more concrete understanding how national and transnational mentalities are constructed.

Overall, *Europe Un-Imagined* is an interesting book, and Stankiewicz’s anthropological approach is effective in pointing out the practical realities behind a television station working to create and disseminate a broader understanding of a European culture that goes beyond national cultures. We get a much more nuanced picture of the interaction between the national and the European through this study. The book also underlines points made in other recent studies: networks and transnational collaboration are very central to a wider European culture, and we need to understand that the local, national and transnational are not by definition in conflict. Mediated cultural encounters in Europe could very well be about getting programs and stories from different national contexts out to a wider audience through collaboration, rather than thinking in grand European visions and transnational stories and identities.

As already pointed out, the weakness of Stankiewicz’s book can also be explained by his method: anthropological media research in this case is not about actual programs and about actual audiences. Therefore we get an interesting story and analysis of how people working at ARTE see the world, see Europe and their own national culture in that context. We get an interesting story of how they actually work with programs on history and culture, and how they think about audiences. However, in order to really understand the role of ARTE in Europe we would need more case studies of actual programs on history, culture—not to speak of film, television drama, etc.—and we would need studies of audiences and how they understand and use such programs. The quantitative data of programs and audiences are there, and it would be possible from that material to do focus groups of transnational audiences. In the end, if you want to study mediated cultural encounters in Europe, it is not enough to study those that make the programs. You actually have to study programs and their audiences.

Reviewed by Ib Bondebjerg, University of Copenhagen

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by Damien Stankiewicz

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